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**Washington, DC**  
**May 16, 2010**

***Demons du jour***

**Text:** Acts 16:16-34

The *Book of the Acts of the Apostles* begins with the story of Jesus' Ascension, an event which the church celebrated this last Thursday. It then proceeds to tell the story of the beginnings of the church. That story is a story of power and miracles and how a small band of uneducated Jews spread across the world, turning it upside down. It is the story of miraculous changes in human life – of how Gentiles came into Israel's promise, of how the enemies of God became friends of God, of how the demons and powers that beset human life were cast out. It is the latter that is the point of the story we read this morning in which Paul casts out a spirit of divination from a slave girl who has the annoying habit of following him around and announcing him. This story, and all of the stories in *Acts* for that matter, are meant to be demonstrations that the Christ who had ascended to heaven now *reigns* in heaven, and that God's Spirit had indeed come upon these people, just as the prophets and Jesus had promised it would.

Many of these stories we can easily understand and easily see as demonstrations of the new thing that God is doing in the earth. But some of them, such as casting out spirits of divination, we, I suspect, regard as a bit dated, belonging to a less sophisticated time. Who among us believes in spirits of divination anymore? Who, for that matter, believes in *any* of the demons that Jesus and the apostles cast out? Our most generous interpretation usually allows that what the ancients ignorantly called demons are now better diagnosed now as epilepsy, mental illness and the like. That is often the best we can do with these stories, for not only are we suspicious about talk of demons, we are morally very suspicious of anybody who blames his or her shortcomings

on the powers of demons and principalities and authorities. The devil should never be an excuse for bad morals or bad science.

The ancient world, however, took the notion of demons, and principalities and authorities very seriously, and it wasn't always a matter of ignorance. The ancients took these other-worldly beings seriously insofar as they, whatever they were, bedeviled human life. In fact, they seemed to be such a pervasive part of life that one could actually count on their power so as to make a buck, as did the owners of the slave girl.

This is important to recognize for much of Christianity's great appeal in the ancient world was its claim to have defeated these powers and authorities. It announced that in the crucifixion, they had been decisively defeated. In the resurrection and especially in the ascended Christ's reigning in heaven, all these powers were now subject to *his* reign. Although Christ's reign would only be fully evident at the last day, still their dominance over human life was over. And so human life was no longer under the thrall of these half-gods, who were contradictory, capricious and demanding and who had had their way with human life for far too long. To the ancient world, therefore, the message of the gospel was not anything so mild as much of American religion is, that is, that there were now new possibilities for those who might wish to grasp them. To them, the gospel was a message that human life had been set free in a radical way: No more demons.

This was the new thing that the gospel proclaimed. To proclaim Christ as risen and ascended was not simply the proclamation of a miracle, that is, the resuscitation of a dead man. Rather to proclaim Christ as risen was to proclaim that all the demons that had beset and bedeviled human life were overcome. It was to proclaim as St. Paul said, that Christ reigns in power for us, and that all has been made subject to him. Christ is king of the universe as *Revelations* says.

What that meant was that the order of the world, which had been upset and chaotic ever since the Fall of Adam and Eve, was finally restored. Not only was it restored to its proper proportions, the right and the good could now in Christ be seen even more clearly than even in the beginning, and not only could it be seen more clearly, it was now possible to live in its light.

Here the ancients were not so simple as to invoke demons when they couldn't explain things or needed an excuse. Rather, they recognized that something was wrong with the way things worked in the world. Things that should be good somehow could make life worse. This included all sorts of good things. It included the love between a man and woman, which every culture has recognized also has the power to make us mad. Similarly, they knew that honest achievement can also breed pride in oneself and resentment in others. Virtues such as loyalty and patriotism can have the power to incite wars and violence, and war and violence, they knew, respected no rules or order; they upset everything. Greek tragedy is witness to this understanding of good things losing proportion and destroying human lives.

It was as if each god – the goddess of love, the god of the underworld, the god of the sea, the god of war, the god of the sun and the goddess of the moon, really were separate gods, each with its own claim on human life and each with its own peculiar logic. Living an ordered and harmonious life in these conditions thus seemed impossible, for the duties owed to one god could easily violate those owed to another. Thus human life often made no sense. That is why it was so earth shaking to say that Christ is risen and that Christ reigns in power, for to say that is to say that all these half-gods do not have the final say over human life. It was to say that in Christ each is put in its place, and does not have to drive us beyond where we ought to be. It was to say that we can live a life that is not full of contradictions, a life in harmony with others and with the world, a life where love does not consume us and make us mad, or where loyalty does not have to

mean war and violence, a life where even war has its limits.

We do not often think that way, though. Belief in demons for us is a superstition, worthy to be considered only on adolescent television shows such as “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” Insofar as we think of demons simply as scaly, pointy-tailed monsters we are quite right. Those things don’t really exist. But the problem is that we don’t see demons for what they really are. We don’t see how there are things that do dominate us. A good part of the reason we don’t, a good part of the reason we think that demons are only so much superstition, is because we seem to have gained so much power over the parts of life that demons and principalities and authorities were once thought to dominate. They couldn’t have been much to begin with, we think, if with a little technology we were able to banish them so easily. Epilepsy and mental illness are treatable. And it really is far more efficient to treat them with medication than it is to try to exorcise them.

As a result, a lot of our religious views have changed as well. For most people religion is not needed now to cast demons out and establish order. Religion is something more like a positive energy that helps us to establish our own order, and to help us with our own priorities. God helps those who help themselves, we say. Even the idea of the risen and ascended Christ reigning in power seems a bit excessive. No, it seems far better to be less grandiose and keep things on a more manageable level. Reason and tolerance, with just a little divine help, seem better ways to deal with our lives.

So we tend to think. But between us and them, I suspect that the ancients were perhaps closer to the truth of the matter, at least once you strip off the colorful vestments that they tended to clothe demons in. Why? Because demons, or at least principalities and authorities are still with us. They are with us at least to the degree that still to this day, some very good things such as love, success, power, and loyalty tend to generate lives of their own. They can get out of control

no matter how much we help ourselves or how reasonable we try to be. We still are dominated, and any number of half good things end up destroying order and harmony in our lives. Among these is included our technology, the very thing that deludes us into thinking that we are the masters of the universe. Let us consider what some of these demons *du jour* are.

Romantic love is one example. Romantic love can be a good thing, a very good thing. It can promise and hint at some sort of higher calling, something that will take us out of the ordinary and out of a narrow existence. It promises intimacy and joy. Indeed, it often starts us off on the path of intimacy and joy, which is precisely where it has something of the divine to it. But, human love is not transcendent, and for those who mistakenly believe that it is, it can take life over. Men and women seek to repeat its initial good feelings over and over again, and then too often find that it does not fulfill its promises in every way. Often marriage experts say that the key to a satisfying marriage is not to have high expectations. Now, I don't know that that means that one ought to have low expectations, but the fact of the matter is that when we expect another human being to be our eternal destiny and happiness, we put a crushing burden on them, and have put the good of love and marriage way out of proportion. We then become frustrated; instead of finding what really does fulfill and using that to enhance a marriage, we make the marriage do everything. It can crumble under the weight.

Similarly with loyalty to friends or to country. Loyalty is an honorable virtue; to feel it and to act on it, putting oneself on the line for another person or some noble cause is to go beyond ordinary life and to feel a sense of fulfillment. But loyalty, too, has a place and is not everything. Countries and human communities are not transcendent, and to act as if they were is soon to find a life all out of proportion, disfigured by a fanatical set of values that will allow one never to see another's point of view, much less the distinctive value to another's country or community. It is to

give license to all sorts of mischief in the name of what otherwise had been worthwhile. It can give rise to fanaticism, whether that of terrorism or empire.

Power is a third example, and in this town needs no particular illustration.

So in ways like this there are demons and half-gods still among us. These are things that promise a better world, and a more fulfilled life, and, to a degree, they at first give it. That is why they are half-gods. But they are only half; they only hint at transcendence. To treat them as ultimate, and to make them provide the order for everything else in your life is to find that they do not always give freedom and fulfillment; sometimes, even often they give only obsession and a sense of being dominated, a sense that something is not healthy. Here I would add technology to the list of half-gods we idolize but which don't save. It has given us much, but we have mistakenly come to believe that it can provide all answers and all order, thinking that it will provide perfect beginnings at birth and at the end of life and maybe even, someday, life everlasting, and cures for everything in-between. What is a help in its proper place, when it becomes an idol it also becomes a demon.

Now the point of saying that the ancients may have had a much better sense of the demons that affect human life is not to prove a point about demons, although the astute will recognize them for what they are. It is far more a point, or even several points, about what Christianity is and does, and what it means to say that Christ is risen and that Christ has ascended to the Father and reigns in power.

It means first of all that all that exists – us, others, principalities, authorities and everything else – is subject to God's reign and is brought into harmony and order. There is nothing other than the love of God in Christ Jesus that we need to worship and adore, or pray to, to have life. The book of Ecclesiastes has said that to everything there is a time and a season – a

time to sow, and a time to reap, a time to laugh and a time to weep. That order, that time is in the eternal word through whom all things were made. To worship him, to adore him, to know him, is then to start to understand that things do have their time, and that they are not necessarily all the time, and it is to start to discern what that time is.

And to know that time and order is then to know the value of each thing. It is to know what is to be used for other things, and to know that God alone is the full end of human life which we are to enjoy, as St. Augustine famously taught. To know that order is to count no thing more than it is, even if it flatters and entices us. It is also not to dismiss good things either. Just because romantic love has often been debased and made vulgar, doesn't mean that it doesn't have a value. It does. The choice we have to make therefore is not between a romantic love that makes us mad and body denying abstinence. It is not a choice between a universal care for humanity and loyalty to friends or country. It is not a choice between technology and pure untouched nature. Each is good in its own way. Each is demonic, though, when we fail to recognize its order.

Now, talking this way about order is itself I suspect a tall order, for it is easy enough to talk about each thing having a time and a place, but a lot more difficult to say what that time and place actually is. While Ecclesiastes says that everything has its time, he also admits that we don't really know what those times are. But, fortunately, we don't have to figure out what everything's place and time is. We simply have to figure out our time and place with respect to Christ, who sets and rules over all order. To get that straight lets us see straight on everything else. What is important and what is not all starts to fall into place when this first relation, this first example of order in our lives comes clear.

The peace that passes all understanding that Christ promises is true, because Christ is the one who now reigns in power for us. That peace is the glory and heart of the Christian faith, for it

is the result of Christ freeing us from all the demons *du jour* that bedevil us. But sometimes that peace also appears to be the hardest and most evanescent part of Christian life. While Christ reigns and no demon ought to have power over us, we continue to struggle because we give the demons power over our lives. We become entranced by their promises, and we pursue them. Like the owner of the slave girl, we even make a lot of money from them, and therefore resist giving them up.

People often talk of Christianity as if the hardest part of it is in accepting, intellectually, its doctrinal claims – that there is a God, that God is three persons in one God, that the Son became flesh and dwelt among us, and died and rose for us. They are right, of course, those are hard things to accept. But the problem isn't really an intellectual one. It is a problem of accepting the mighty freedom that it bring from the demons that we far too often welcome into our lives, the half gods who promise much and give us nothing back for our worship.

On this day, as we celebrate Christ's Ascension and his reigning in power for us, let us do the difficult thing, and give up ordering up the demons *du jour*. Let us accept our freedom and happiness. And when we do, acknowledging that Christ reigns in power for us, life will be that much more peaceful and happy.